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ABSTRACT

The digest is a summary of the information presented in the monograph, "Students on the Move: Reaching and Teaching Highly Mobile Children and Youth". It describes the different reasons for high mobility and the characteristics of highly mobile families, explains the specific educational and social support needs of highly mobile students, and briefly reviews the findings on effective school programs and classroom practices. Highly mobile students include the children of migrant workers, of families experiencing domestic violence, of families in unstable work and home situations that result from high poverty, and of military and immigrant families. The academic consequences of high mobility are severe. High mobility hits urban children particularly hard. Inner city students are more likely to change schools frequently. Children of migrant workers cross school, district, and state lines. Subgroups within the migrant population include students with disabilities and older immigrant youth who enter school with little prior educational experience. To address school stability issues of homeless children, Congress passed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, which allows homeless students to remain in their original schools, even if they no longer live in the residency area, and schools must provide transportation. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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Charles A. Walls

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PROVIDING HIGHLY MOBILE STUDENTS WITH AN EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

Amidst the many challenges that the American education system faces, one challenge in particular remains outside the range of wide public scrutiny: highly mobile students. Students who are highly mobile move six or more times in the course of their K-12 education and come from a variety of backgrounds. They include the children of migrant workers, of families experiencing domestic violence, of families in unstable work and home situations that result from high poverty, and of military and immigrant families.

National data on third graders reveal that one-half million children attended more than three schools between the first and third grade. Thirty percent of children in low-income families changed schools versus eight percent of children well above the poverty line. High mobility hits urban children particularly hard. Inner city students are more likely to change schools frequently (United States General Accounting Office, 1994); approximately twenty-five percent of urban third graders were highly mobile compared to approximately one seventh of suburban and rural students. Some urban schools report student turnover rates from forty to eighty percent (Stover, 2000).

The academic consequences of high mobility are severe. It may take four to six months for mobile students to recover academically from a transfer and they are half as likely to graduate from high school as their non-mobile peers. Many highly mobile students experience isolation after a move, which impacts attendance and performance (Homes for Homelessness, 1999; Rumberger, Larson, Ream & Palardy, 1999). Students who move frequently have lower attendance rates: a twenty percent absentee rate has resulted in achievement scores twenty points lower than their stable peers (Family Housing Fund, 1998). Lastly, mobile students are twice as likely to repeat a grade, and mobility even negatively impacts the academic achievement of stable students (Jacobson, 2001; Kerbow, 1996; see Popp, Stronge, & Hindman, 2003, Appendix D). Students who live in high poverty and frequently change schools suffer the most academically; however, some categories of highly mobile students (e.g., children of military and immigrant families) are not from low-income families. This digest explores several subpopulations of highly mobile students, their needs, reasons for mobility, and effective programs and practices that meet those needs (see Popp, Stronge, & Hindman, 2003, Appendix B).

Migratory Children and Youth

Children of migrant workers cross not only school and district lines but multiple state lines, as families follow available work. In 1994 and 2001, Congress addressed the educational needs of this population in legislation that ensures that they are not penalized for lacking continuity in relation to curricula, academic standards and graduation requirements. Subgroups within this population that have additional needs include students with disabilities and older immigrant youth who enter the school system with little prior educational experience. Despite the fact that most migrant children have parents who work full-time, three-fifths of them live in poverty. These students also have inadequate health care, which contributes to school absences. Migratory children have linguistic and cultural differences, as well as work responsibilities, which tend to isolate them from their school peers.

A report published in 2002 found that schools serving a large proportion of limited English proficient migrant students had lower expectations of student performance, less consistent standards and assessments, and less experienced teachers than other schools (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). To address this problem, federal programs such as The Migrant Education Program (MEP) provide academic and compensatory instruction, support for parental involvement, bilingual and multicultural instruction, vocational instruction, career education services, special guidance counseling and testing services, as well as health and preschool services (General Accounting Office, 1999).

Migratory students also have delays in education while their families settle in new areas and while their new schools wait for records that indicate the child's appropriate grade placement, educational needs, and health information. As a result, states have instituted programs, such as the Migrant Student Record Transfer in Texas, to share student information among 46 receiving states that serve migratory children.

Homeless Children and Unaccompanied Youth

Urban areas have higher concentrations of homeless children than rural and suburban areas; although children in elementary school represent the largest number of homeless children, many secondary school students may not be identified because they no longer attend school, hide their homelessness, or do not access support services (Penuel & Davey, 2000).

To specifically address the issue of school stability, Congress passed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, which allows homeless students to remain in their school of origin (if this is preferred by the family) even if the student no longer lives in the residency area. In addition, schools must provide transportation, if remaining in the school of origin is in the student's best interest (Stronge, 2000). However, as with migratory students, homeless mobile students often experience delays in their enrollment because of inefficient information transfer and as a result may lose days or weeks of schooling and require many more to catch up. To address this problem, the McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to immediately enroll homeless students and subsequently obtain any missing student information (McKinney-Vento Act, 2001).

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, liaisons build awareness throughout their school districts and community and collaborate with shelter workers and other service providers who work with homeless families and youth to build support networks. Liaisons must also advocate for unaccompanied youth, including runaways and those not allowed to return to their homes, when the student wishes to enroll in school.

In addition to the liaison's efforts, if localities want to access federal funding for housing needs, including shelters and transitional housing, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires the establishment of a Continuum of Care, a network of social service agencies. In communities where the Continuum of Care is well established or in development, local schools should utilize this resource and consider what information is appropriate to place within the system to simplify their outreach to homeless students. School social workers, guidance counselors,

and nurses can also contribute to these services (Giacobbe, 2002; Popp, Hindman, & Stronge 2002).

Children of Immigrant Families

Over half of the foreign born population in the United States is from Latin America, over 25 percent from Asia, and about 16 percent from Europe. Approximately 18 percent speak languages other than English, Spanish being the most common. Many of these families, especially undocumented ones, have members who are rural agricultural workers or urban service and manufacturing workers.

Learning to navigate a different system of education and understanding the policies and procedures of American schools add to the number of challenges immigrant youth face as they attempt to get an education. In addition, communities that attract large numbers of immigrants sometimes act on concerns over lost jobs, "illegal status," and rising social service and educational costs and may seek, as with Proposition 187 in California, to exclude undocumented immigrant children from schools. To counter these initiatives, the Supreme Court ruled in Plyer v. Doe in 1982 that schools may not deny admissions to students on the basis of their residency status.

According to suggestions from the research, schools should also adopt the following procedures to meet the needs of immigrant students: train school personnel in the cultural expectations of the students and families they serve; use bilingual staff to assist non-English speaking parents and students through the admission process; and create admissions policies and procedures that are consistent with immigration laws (see Popp, Stronge, & Hindman, 2003, Appendix C; Morse & Ludovia, 1999). In addition, schools should look at strategies and resources that address the significant language barriers that many immigrant students face. Among these are (see Popp, Stronge, & Hindman, 2003, Appendix E): keeping students with age appropriate peers (ESCORT, 1998); avoiding overcorrecting (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2002); and assessing academic skills of incoming students in their native language.

Children of Military Families

These highly mobile children have parents who are career military or junior service members in any of the several branches of the U. S. military (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, or National Guard). Thirty-five percent of these students change Department of Defense schools (DoDs) each year; 32 to 50 percent qualify for free or reduced price lunch; and 94 percent of children of enlisted military have parents whose highest education is a high school diploma. Though 90 percent of military families are comprised of two-parent households, the long-term deployment of one parent often forces these military families to function as one-parent households. Despite the challenges such statistics normally imply, these highly mobile students, unlike migratory or homeless children, consistently perform at academic levels equal to or surpassing the national average for public schools; this high level of achievement includes minority students (Smrekar, Guthrie, Owens, & Sims, 2001).

Various military branches have devised strategies to address these challenges and to promote academic and social success, which in some case may be useful for other subpopulations. They include: the establishment of family and educational support networks during deployments; the encouragement of parental involvement associated with high academic achievement; the use of school counselors to meet the needs of military adolescents and to advocate and implement strategies for smoother school transitions; and a "corporate culture" that supports families and encourages strong school-family-military partnerships. This culture includes high expectations for school success; a welcoming school community; school counselors trained to understand and advocate for the needs of students; the expectation that parents participate in the child's education through parent meeting attendance and volunteer work.

—Charles A. Walls
Teachers College, Columbia University

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (800) 601-4868. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Inés Sucre, Managing Editor.

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